

Don't Give Up on Church

When my friend Ferrell Hardison moved to Princeton, N.C., in 1990, he began pastoring a Pentecostal church with 70 people. Founded in 1918, it was an aging congregation with a tiny budget. Ferrell was the 25th pastor to lead the church, and some of his predecessors had stayed only a year or two. Not exactly a young pastor's dream job!

Today, the church has a new name—The Bridge—and it has grown to 1,250 in attendance. Last fall the congregation broke ground on a new worship center, and they've planted a satellite congregation in Goldsboro, N.C., that already has 300 members. A large percentage of the church's \$2.6 million annual budget is marked for outreach, and Ferrell estimates that at least 3,000 people have come to Christ through their ministry in recent years.

Ferrell is a simple guy who believes in prayer. He's not a celebrity CEO pastor who runs his church like a business, nor is he a self-appointed "apostolic" tyrant who barks orders to his staff. He believes in core biblical values like servanthood, team ministry and compassion. And people are flocking to The Bridge because they find Jesus-focused worship, Bible-centered preaching and, most of all, New Testament-style love.

I'm pretty sure this is how church was meant to be.

I'm sharing this success story because I hear a lot of complaining these days. I know people who have stopped going to church for myriad reasons: (1) They were hurt by a pastor or snubbed by church members; (2) They think all Christians are hypocrites (I don't know one Christian, myself included, who does not have at least a streak of hypocrisy); or (3) No church within an hour of driving distance meets their standards or suits their tastes.

Because of this negativity, many Christians have settled into a gloomy cynicism. They think America is ripe for judgment and that we might as well shut the blinds, curl up on the couch and wait for the rapture. That is really sad, because this dark hour is our best opportunity to shine.

I refuse to give up on the church. Every month I see encouraging signs of spiritual life. Many pastors are trading in old wineskins and praying for new wine. Congregations are working with local city officials to help the poor. Young people are finding Jesus and passionately fighting social injustice.

Even though we are in a desperate hour, some people have decided that it's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. They know the lost are more open to the gospel when times are tough.

When we stepped into 2012, I felt the Lord told me this is the year for local churches to thrive. He gave me Revelation 3:2a: "Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die" (NASB).

I know churches can get off track. They can become mired in religious tradition; they can become ineffective because of sin in leadership; they can lose their edge because of lack of intimacy with Christ; or they can be derailed by charismatic excess. But in each case Jesus offers the chance of revitalization.

British preacher Charles Spurgeon reminded his generation that God does not have a Plan B for reaching the world. The church is Plan A. "Some Christians try to go to heaven alone, in solitude," he wrote. "But believers are not compared to bears or lions or other animals that wander alone. Those who belong to Christ are sheep ... they love to get together. Sheep go in flocks, and so do God's people."

I encourage you to find your flock, pray for your shepherd,

love God's people and use all your spiritual gifts to bring the lost into a community of faith where they can find shelter from the coming storm.

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